

MEMBERSHIP IN CERTAIN FRATERNAL ORGANIZATIONS

A PASTORAL APPROACH

The Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR) has prepared this document as a basic initial resource for pastors, church workers, and lay leaders as they inform congregational members about questions and concerns that may arise regarding membership in certain fraternal organizations. In previous evaluations of specific fraternal societies the CTCR has noted with appreciation that these organizations are typically “engaged in many commendable humanitarian efforts...and social opportunities that contribute significantly to the common good of our society.”¹ This word of commendation stands. The primary concern of this document, however, has to do with participation in lodge rituals and ceremonies that involve a Christian in a contradictory confession regarding central truths of the Christian faith: the doctrines of the Trinity, the person and work of Christ, and/or justification by grace through faith in Christ alone. Such a contradictory or inadequate confession occurs most specifically when a generic Supreme Being is invoked in religious rituals apart from any reference to Jesus Christ and/or when the saving work of Christ is denied by teachings that assert or imply that living a moral life together with lodge membership assures an eternal reward.²

The Historic Position of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

“[I]t is taught that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God through our merit, work, or satisfactions, but that we receive the forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God out of grace for Christ’s sake through faith when we believe that Christ has suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us” (AC IV, 1-2). With these words the Augsburg Confession expresses what the Apology of the Augsburg Confession identifies as “the most important topic of Christian teaching” (Ap IV, 2). In the Lutheran church the doctrine of justification by grace through faith has been identified historically as the doctrine upon which the church stands or falls.

The Ecumenical Creeds emphasize that a right confession of the doctrine of the Trinity is equally essential to the Christian faith. “Whoever wants to be saved must, above all, hold the catholic faith...that we worship one God in trinity and the Trinity in unity, neither confusing the persons nor dividing the substance” (Athanasian Creed, 1,4).³

In light of the centrality of the doctrines of the Trinity and the work of Christ—as well as other theological and pastoral concerns—The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) has historically taken a strong position in opposition to pastors and congregations allowing congregational members to

¹ See page 4 of the CTCR’s evaluation of the *Loyal Order of the Moose*, which is available on line at <http://www.lcms.org?2150> together with evaluations of *The Lodge* in general (focusing on Masonic Lodge organizations), *the Fraternal Order of the Eagles*, and the *Benevolent and Protective Order of the Elks*. The CTCR commends the continuing use of these resources in conjunction with the present document. Also recommended is *How to Respond to the Lodge* by L. James Rongstad (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1995; order number 12-6003 [www.cph.org]).

² This document grows out of a request from the 2006 convention of the Nebraska District (Res. 1.05) that the CTCR prepare a “study on the issue of ‘Secret Society’ or Lodge membership, including but not limited to information pertaining to possible changes in teaching and practice in the last 50 years and also the differences between the wide varieties of these organizations” and “that the CTCR study include practical guidelines” for pastors and congregations to follow when dealing with this issue.

³ The confessional citations here are taken from *The Book of Concord*, Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000).

have “membership or participation in any organization that in its objectives, ceremonies, or practices is inimical to the Gospel of Jesus Christ or the faith and life of the Christian Church.”⁴ In practice this position has been applied with reference to lodges and other fraternal organizations which in their initiation rituals, prayers, and other religious ceremonies (e.g., funeral services) require a Christian—by participation in such ceremonies—publicly to compromise his or her confession of faith in the Triune God and in the doctrine of salvation only through faith in Christ. Accordingly, upon the dissolution of the LCMS’ Commission on Organizations at the LCMS’ 2001 convention,⁵ the bylaws of the Synod charge the CTCR with assisting pastors and congregations of the Synod in implementing the above stated position.

Bylaw 3.9.6.3.1 of the LCMS’ official *Handbook* (2007) provides the following guidelines:

It is the solemn, sacred, and God-given duty of every pastor properly to instruct his people concerning the sinfulness of all organizations that

- (1) explicitly or implicitly deny the Holy Trinity, the deity of Christ, or the vicarious atonement;
- (2) promise spiritual light apart from that revealed in the Holy Scripture;
- (3) attach spiritual or eternal rewards to the works or virtues of men; and/or
- (4) embrace ideologies or principles that clearly violate an express teaching of the Holy Scriptures concerning the relationships of men to one another.⁶

How seriously the LCMS considers this matter is especially clear from guidelines for ministering to prospective members who are already members of such organizations. “The responsibility of diligent and conscientious pastoral care requires that pastors of the Synod do not administer Holy Communion to nor admit to communicant membership members of such organizations who, *after thorough instruction*, refuse to sever their affiliation with such organizations.” Direction is given that ongoing efforts should be made to bring individuals to recognize “their *contradictory confessions*.”⁷

Recognition is given to exceptional cases which may permit the pastor to administer Holy Communion to a person who is outwardly connected with a lodge or other fraternal organization. However, in such cases the individual concerned should be under the pastoral care of the congregation and should be willing to renounce the anti-Christian character of the organization’s rituals and ceremonies. The final paragraph of the bylaw noted above includes the following statement: “The Synod instructs its officials to exercise vigilant care and urges all pastors and congregations to carry out these provisions and faithfully *eradicate all compromise or negation of the Gospel* through members’ identification with objectionable organizations.”⁸

Confessing Christ Alone⁹

The preceding summary of the LCMS’ historic position regarding membership in certain lodge and fraternal organizations shows that the Synod’s central concern has been that pastors and congregations (and their individual members) give a clear, truthful, and uncompromising witness, both

⁴ 2007 *Handbook*, 176 (Bylaw 3.9.6.3.1 [a]).

⁵ 2001 Res. 7-27A “To Combine Commission on Organizations and Commission on Theology and Church Relations and Revise CTCR Bylaws” (2001 *Convention Proceedings*, 174-75).

⁶ 2007 *Handbook*, 176 (Bylaw 3.9.6.4.1 [a]).

⁷ *Ibid.*, 176-77 (Bylaw 3.9.6.3.1 [b]). Emphasis added.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 177 (Bylaw 3.9.6.3.1 [e]). Emphasis added.

⁹ All biblical quotations in this document are taken from the *English Standard Version* (ESV) of the Bible (Crossway Bibles, 2001).

publicly and privately, “to the one and only Gospel set forth in Holy Scriptures...”¹⁰ By holding membership in such organizations a Christian is not to give a public witness that contradicts what he or she otherwise publicly confesses by virtue of holding membership in a Christian congregation—namely biblical truth concerning the Holy Trinity, the person and work of Christ, and eternal salvation only by God’s grace received through faith in Christ alone.

Holy Scripture clearly teaches that God’s love and His gift of eternal salvation is for all people. All people have sinned. That sin has separated sinners from a holy God (Is 59:2). Man’s sinful human nature places him under God’s condemnation (Rom 5:16-18), and the sinful transgression of God’s Law brings death (Rom 6:23). What hope can a sinner have of being saved from the deserved wrath and punishment of God? God planned the salvation of sinners from eternity (Eph 1:3-10). He began working out His plan by choosing Abraham and his descendants through Isaac and Jacob to bring His blessing of salvation to all peoples (Gen 12:1-3). God continued working out His plan through one particular nation, His chosen people Israel. Yet, His salvation would be brought “to the ends of the earth” (Is 49:6). God brought His saving plan to fulfillment when He “so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (Jn 3:16). While it is certainly true that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23), it is also true that “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners” (1 Tim 1:15). The Christian confesses by virtue of membership in a Christian congregation that he or she believes that there is only “one God and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all” (1 Tim 2:5). Further, a Christian confesses that “in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself” (2 Cor 5:19). Christ “is the propitiation...for the sins of the whole world” (1 Jn 2:2).

God’s plan of salvation is universal. Indeed, Christ “died for all” (2 Cor 5:15). It is equally true that “there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name [other than the name of Jesus] under heaven, given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). God’s work and gift of eternal salvation is universally *inclusive*; it is for all people. Yet, the gift of salvation is also *exclusive*; it is given *only* through faith in Christ. In response to the Philippian jailer’s question “What must I do to be saved?” Paul and Silas responded, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved” (Acts 16:30-31). Jesus made clear the exclusive nature of God’s work of salvation when He said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (Jn 14:6).

Christians who confess Christ alone as the only hope of eternal salvation are compelled by His love to “no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised” (2 Cor 5:15). Such living for Christ means that Christians in all they do will seek first the kingdom of God (Mt 6:33). They will strive in thought, word, and deed in every area of life, both private and public, to bring honor to the triune God (Jn 5:23). To be sure, the individual Christian will fall short in such striving. Perfection does not exist on this side of heaven. However, that reality does not give the disciple of Christ permission knowingly and willingly to engage in actions and associations that will, in one way or another, compromise his or her witness to and for Christ. Clearly, Jesus expects His followers to deny themselves and lose their life for Him (Mt 16:24). The allegiance that Jesus requires, and the serious consequence for failing to give that allegiance, are summed up in Jesus’ words: “So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven” (Mt 10:32-33).

Membership in Masonic Lodge Organizations

When Christians join in the public worship assembly of the congregation in which they hold membership, they are in effect saying by such participation, with St. Paul: “I am not ashamed of the

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 175 (Bylaw 3.9.6.3).

gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” (Rom 1:16). It would be a compromise of this public witness to their faith given in corporate worship for them publicly to associate with an organization that through its religious rituals, ceremonies, and prayers “waters down” or obscures this Gospel. By holding membership in such an organization a Christian may, in effect, be saying, “I am ashamed of the gospel.”

The most “religious” fraternal organization when it comes to rituals and ceremonies that contradict or compromise the Gospel of Christ is the Masonic Lodge and its various related organizations such as the Shriners, the Eastern Star, and Job’s Daughters.¹¹ Many in Masonic leadership would contend that while Freemasonry has religious elements—an altar, a sacred book (which varies based on the dominant religion in the culture where the local lodge is located), a chaplain, prayers—Freemasonry is not a religion. This contention, however, has been challenged from within the ranks of Freemasonry itself. We may cite, for example, a book titled *Light Invisible* authored by an adherent of Freemasonry who identifies himself only by the title Vindex. *Light Invisible* is a response to the book *Darkness Visible* written by a Rev. Walton Hannah, an Anglican clergyman who was attempting to alert the Church of England to the contradictions between the practice of Freemasonry and the teachings of the Christian church. Vindex writes this in response to Hannah’s description of the Christian faith: “Christianity, [Hannah] says again and again, is an exclusive faith. Christ opened the only gate of heaven to man below.... In His name only is salvation to be found.... If true religion is thus to be narrowed down to salvation in no other name under heaven,...then any such ‘Christian’ must indeed be straining his conscience to the breaking-point by accepting initiation into the broader and deeper mysteries of Freemasonry. I for one can never understand how anyone who takes an exclusive view of Christ as the only complete revelation of God’s truth can become a Freemason without suffering from spiritual schizophrenia.”¹²

The writings of Henry W. Coil, a 33rd degree Mason, have brought him recognition as an accepted authority on Freemasonry by many state Grand Lodges. In his book *A Comprehensive View of Freemasonry*, Mr. Coil addresses the question “What is Freemasonry?” He writes: “Freemasonry, in its broadest and most comprehensive sense, is a system of morality and social ethics, a primitive religion and a philosophy of life,...incorporating a broad humanitarianism,...; it is a religion without a creed, being of no sect but finding truth in all;...it is moderate, universal, and so liberal as to permit each individual to form and express his own opinion, even as to what Freemasonry is or ought to be, and invites him to improve it if he can.”¹³ In other words, according to Mr. Coil Freemasonry is a universalistic religion that combines whatever “truth” it finds in the various sects.

In his *Masonic Encyclopedia*, under the topic “Religion,” Mr. Coil further writes: “Freemasonry certainly requires a belief in the existence of, and man’s dependence upon, a Supreme Being to whom he is responsible. What can a church add to that, except to bring into one fellowship those who have like feelings?...[T]he difference between a lodge and a church is one of degree and not of kind.”¹⁴

¹¹ Another helpful resource for evaluating the Masonic Lodge is a booklet authored by LCMS pastors George A. Mather and Larry Nichols titled *Masonic Lodge* in the series titled *Zondervan Guide to Cults and Religious Movements*, edited by Alan W. Gomes (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995).

¹² *Light Invisible: The Freemason’s Answer to Darkness Visible* (Boston, New York: Poemandres Press, 1996), 35. Cf. Walton Hannah, *Darkness Visible: A Christian Appraisal of Freemasonry* (London: Saint Austin Press, 1998).

¹³ Henry Wilson Coil, *A Comprehensive View of Freemasonry* (New York: Macoy Publishing, 1954), 234.

¹⁴ Henry Wilson Coil, *Coil’s Masonic Encyclopedia*, edited by Dr. William Moseley Brown, Dr. William L. Cummings, and Harold Van Buren Voorhis (New York: Macoy Publishing, 1961), 512. The discussion in the preceding paragraphs is based largely on evidence provided in an article in the files of the CTCR titled “Is Freemasonry Religion? Coil’s Masonic Encyclopedia.” As the CTCR notes in its evaluation of “The Lodge” (<http://www.lcms.org?2150>), “Lodge organizations commonly insist that they are not a ‘religion’ and that they do not establish a set of ‘doctrines’ to which adherence is required for membership.” In that evaluation, as in this

The unchristian character of Masonic Lodge teachings is shown by the following selected quotations from various rituals and services. In its rituals Freemasonry replaces the biblical teaching of salvation by grace through faith in Christ with a salvation by works. In the very first degree of the Masonic Order (the Entered Apprentice) the symbol of the lambskin is used to impress upon the candidate that: “In all ages the lamb has been deemed an emblem of innocence; he, therefore, who wears the Lambskin as a badge of Masonry is continually reminded of that *purity of life and conduct which is necessary to obtain admittance into the Celestial Lodge above*, where the Supreme Architect of the Universe presides.”¹⁵ The rituals for the second and third degrees (a person is considered a full Mason upon completing the 3rd degree) include similar references to purity of heart and rectitude of conduct necessary to gain the approval of the Grand Architect of the Universe and thus enter into heaven. The ritual of the Masonic funeral service reminds the family members of the deceased that by means of the white apron given to a Mason “he was constantly reminded of that purity of life and that rectitude of conduct so necessary to his gaining admission into the Celestial Lodge Above.”¹⁶ Such religious teaching is contrary to the Holy Scriptures which clearly teach, “by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one can boast” (Eph 2:8-9). Works (rectitude of conduct) are certainly the necessary evidence of faith. The apostle James writes, “...I will show you my faith by what I do” (James 2:18). But works are not the basis for a person’s admission into heaven (cf. Rom 3:28).

Masonry denies the doctrine of the Trinity revealed in Holy Scripture by the names it uses to address God, and by its failure to refer in any way to the person and divine nature of Christ. As a result, the religious rituals of Freemasonry fall under the judgment of Jesus when He says: “Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him” (Jn 5:23). Since it is Freemasonry’s intent to allow each person to have his own opinions in religious matters, it does not permit its rituals to teach any specific doctrine regarding the nature of God. Henry Coil writes: “Men have to decide whether they want a God like the ancient Hebrew *Jahweh*, a partisan, tribal God,...or a boundless, eternal, universal, undenominational, and international, Divine Spirit, so vastly removed from the speck called *man*, that He cannot be known, named, or approached.”¹⁷ The god of Masonry is a generic Supreme Being identified by such names as the Almighty Father of the Universe, the Grand Architect of the Universe, etc. Masonry’s god is a universalistic “God” that can be accepted by all applicants for membership so as not to offend those who would reject the Christian doctrine of the Trinity.

With respect to the person and work of Jesus Christ, Freemasonry must be faulted principally for its silence or lack of reference to Christ, rather than for any direct statements about Him. All prayers directed to the Grand Architect of the Universe are offered apart from any reference to Jesus Christ. For the Christian, of course, such practice contradicts the Scripture’s teaching concerning prayer. Jesus taught: “...whatever you ask of the Father *in my name*, he will give it to you” (Jn 16:23). In addition, whenever Scripture passages are quoted in Masonic rituals, any references in the text of Scripture to Jesus Christ are intentionally omitted. The reason for such omission is that Freemasonry does not want to give offense to those who participate in those rituals who may not be of a Christian persuasion. Moreover, any rituals that imply or directly affirm a salvation by human conduct deny Christ’s complete and perfect work of atonement through which sinners are reconciled to a holy God.

document, the CTCR “does not focus on these claims—however true or not true they may be in actual practice—but points to *religious tenets or themes* present and even espoused, both explicitly and implicitly, in the official rites and literature of the organization in question.”

¹⁵ Raymond Lee Allen, et. al., *Tennessee Craftsmen or Masonic Textbook*, 14th edition (Nashville, Tennessee: Board of Custodian Members, 1963), 17. Emphasis added.

¹⁶ Allen, *Tennessee Craftsmen*. Quoted in John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *The Secret Teachings of the Masonic Lodge* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1989), 82.

¹⁷ Coil, *Masonic Encyclopedia*, 516. Emphasis in original.

Freemasonry as a general principle prohibits its members from bearing witness to Christ in lodge meetings. When discussing the 10th degree of the Scottish Rite, Albert Pike, a prolific Masonic author, writes: “The Mason’s creed goes further than that. No man, it holds, has any right in any way to interfere with the religious belief of another.”¹⁸ In other words, in the midst of a lodge’s religious rituals a Christian would not be allowed to bear witness to Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior lest such witness offend a fellow lodge member. By accepting a required silence regarding such witness, he is, in effect, denying Jesus before others.

Perhaps the denial of Christ in Masonry can best be summed up in the following statement from the Maundy Thursday ritual of the Rose Croix (18th degree) of the Scottish Rite: “We meet this day to commemorate the death (of Jesus), not as inspired or divine, for this is not for us to decide.”¹⁹ A Christian who subscribes to Lutheran confessional teaching believes that the Heavenly Father’s gift of eternal life in heaven can only be received through faith created by the Holy Spirit in the work of salvation completed by God’s Son, Jesus Christ.

On the basis of considerations such as the above, it is the official position of the LCMS that a member of an LCMS congregation should not hold membership in any organization whose rituals teach a salvation by works, invoke a generic Supreme Being, and deliberately omit any reference to the truth regarding the person and work of God’s Son.

Membership in Other Fraternal Organizations

Other lodge-based organizations such as the Odd Fellows and the “animal lodges”—Moose, Elks, Eagles—have over the years reduced the use of religious ritual and ceremony. Nevertheless, since such organizations have continued to include statements and practices in their rituals, prayers, and special services that conflict with Christian truth, it would be contradictory for a confessing Christian to hold membership in such organizations. A sampling of such statements and practices, as well as statements made by officials of such organizations, follows.

Odd Fellows. Odd Fellowship is often referred to as “the poor man’s Masonry.” Its ritual contains a rather heavy religious emphasis with frequent and lengthy quotations of Bible passages. The following excerpts are taken from “The Religion of the Ritual” section of the evaluation of the Odd Fellows in the files of the CTCR. “There appears to be little dispute among Odd Fellow authors as to whether the Order is religious or not. At least two books entitled ‘The Religion of Odd Fellowship’ and ‘The Religion of Fraternity’ have been written by members. Both present the basic religious tenets of the ritual: God is the Father of all men, His goodness dictates that He deals in mercy with all, and all men can look forward to eternal life if they have the hope of such life within them. In Odd Fellowship man can find that hope.” “The Order has no concept of sin as it is described in the Bible.... Man is described as being in darkness and chains and void of wisdom, yet is it not through faith in Jesus Christ and the knowledge of the Scriptures that man is brought to light and wisdom but rather through learning the lessons of Odd Fellowship”²⁰

¹⁸ Albert Pike, *Morals and Dogmas of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite of Freemasonry* (Charleston, SC: The Supreme Council of the 33rd Degree for the Southern Jurisdiction of the United States, 1906), 167. Many State *Monitors* (handbooks of lodge rituals) agree with the Texas *Monitor* that Freemasonry’s position is correct in “forbidding all sectarian discussion within its lodge rooms.”

¹⁹ Rose Croix degree of the Scottish Rite of Freemasonry. Quoted in Ankerberg and Weldon, *The Secret Teachings of the Masonic Lodge*, 132.

²⁰ *Independent Order of Odd Fellows*. Prepared from the theological perspective of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

Elks. Among the “animal” lodges, the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks in its rituals and ceremonies gives most obvious expression to religious universalism. A chaplain opens a lodge meeting with a prayer addressed to a heavenly Father. However, this prayer, along with all other prayers in the Elks’ ritual and special services, makes no reference to Jesus Christ as the only mediator between a holy God and sinful human beings. In the initiation ceremony a prayer is offered that concludes with the words, “In all our endeavors for good, lead us and all Elks into the green pastures of knowledge, and beside the still waters of peace.” Again, no mention is made of Jesus Christ as the Good Shepherd who laid down His life for the sheep and through whom alone we are led into God’s eternal peace. Wording in the ceremony that announces the death of a brother Elk and in the funeral service ritual implies that the deceased lodge member has “passed into the light which is beyond the valley of the shadow of death” and that devotion to fraternal duties offers the hope that all Elks will one day be united in bonds of eternal peace.²¹

In response to a request for updated information regarding Elks rituals, a letter from the Grand Lodge in the files of the CTCR indicates that since “our Jewish brethren” do not believe in the doctrine of the Trinity, and in order to avoid insulting an individual’s sensitivities, the Elks rituals use the generic term Supreme Being when referring to God. That same letter also includes the following statements that identify the universalistic religious position of the Elks based on salvation by works: “Adherence to these Ten Commandments with faith in God assures every individual person a heavenly reward.... Elkdom is not a religion. It is an organization of fraternal brothers who must...acknowledge a Supreme Being whom some may call ‘God,’ ‘Exalted Ruler of the Universe,’ ...or whatever they wish to call Him.”

Moose. The Loyal Order of Moose, in recent years, has significantly reduced the religious tone of its rituals. Yet it continues to include in its prayers and services references to the concept of the reward of an eternal life given to those who have lived a good life here on earth. The prayer opening a meeting is offered to a Supreme Being without any reference to Jesus Christ. That prayer concludes with the words “Remind us each day that *the greatest good we can do* is to serve you through service to our fellow man.” However, the Bible teaches that the greatest “work” (good) that God requires is “that you believe in him [Jesus] whom he [God] has sent” in order to have eternal life (John 6:28-29; 40). In burial services for a member of the Moose lodge, and in the annual memorial service to remember a deceased Moose of the past year, statements are made professing that the “Circle of Moose” broken by death will be renewed and restored in eternity. A burial service prayer includes the following thought: “Give us the strength to bear the burden Your wisdom has placed upon us, and *make us strong to battle with the temptations and struggles of this life*, so, that when our day has come, we too may be gathered into Your presence.” In other words, it is an individual’s success in battling the temptations and struggles of this life that leads to his being gathered into God’s presence. Significantly, no reference is made in this prayer to the One [Jesus Christ] who has defeated Satan’s temptations and conquered the greatest struggle—death itself—for us. The memorial service extols the virtues of the departed brother Moose and then states: “Upon the faces of *the great and good* there shines a light reflected from the golden hills of heaven, which death cannot efface or dim, and *for such* for all eternity there waits a peer’s place upon the Seats of the Mighty.”²²

Eagles. Over the years the Fraternal Order of Eagles has also made some changes in its rituals which have reduced somewhat this lodge’s conflict with Christian teaching. However, the same general concerns remain: prayers are offered apart from any reference to Jesus Christ; a kind of righteousness before God by works is taught in prayers and various ritual statements; the teaching concerning God is

²¹ Quotations from *Rituals of the Subordinate Lodge under the Jurisdiction of the Grand Lodge of the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks of the United States of America*, revised 1990.

²² *Ritual of the Loyal Order of Moose*, revised May 1998. *Service of Tribute and Memorial Services*, revised September 1993. Emphasis added.

one that any person who believes in a Supreme Being could accept. The prayer offered by the chaplain as part of the opening ceremony of the lodge includes the following thought: “If we believe all men equal in Thy eyes, we shall be the more worthy of Thy loving care.” Once again, as with other lodge rituals, a person’s worthiness before God is determined not by the saving work of Christ, but by what one does—in this case believing all men to be equal. The initiation ceremony reminds the candidate for membership that death is the grand equalizer of all men and that “you must go naked to the Throne of God.” Yet the ceremony assures the candidate, “you shall enjoy eternal rest.” This assurance is given without any reference to the Savior of the world who alone clothes us with His righteousness to make such eternal rest possible. The memorial service includes this statement concerning the deceased: “He believed in the existence of a Supreme Being, the Father of us all,...and in this belief he died in the hope of a blessed immortality beyond the grave.... For him eternal rest remains.” This statement would imply that merely believing in a Supreme Being brings one a blessed eternity and that such a belief applies to all deceased members of the Eagles’ lodge regardless of their relationship to Christ.²³

Pastoral Approach

As noted at the outset, this document has been prepared as a basic resource that pastors might use as they address issues that exist in their situation regarding membership in fraternal organizations. The synodical bylaw previously quoted indicates that it is the duty of every pastor to “properly to instruct his people” on the basis of the Scriptures and Lutheran Confessions concerning the conflict that membership in lodge and fraternal organizations creates for congregation members. A pastoral approach to this issue should begin with a patient and loving discussion that seeks to inform congregation members or prospective members regarding the implications of lodge membership. Since a Christian has been called “to live for Christ” and to confess the Savior in all actions, associations, and relationships, the integrity the Christian’s confession will be seriously compromised by membership in fraternal organizations adhering to tenets that are contrary to the scriptural Gospel. The pastoral approach urged by the Synod is in keeping with the approach of C.F.W. Walther who advises great patience and pastoral care in dealing with individual cases.²⁴

Those who wish to study in more detail the scriptural and confessional basis for the Synod’s position on membership in fraternal organizations as presented in this document may wish to make use of a study titled “Christians and Their Affiliations” (available from the CTCR’s office). An especially helpful section of this resource provides questions for a Christian to consider when contemplating membership, or evaluating membership currently held, in a fraternal organization. These questions include:

- Does the organization require any kind of religious subscription or make any religious pronouncements? (See 1 Jn 4:1-3; 2 Pet 2:1)
- Does it teach or imply that all religions offer a way of salvation which are equally valid before God?

²³ *Rituals for Fraternal Order of Eagles Opening of Meeting and Initiation of Members*, 1955. *Ritual for Final Tribute to Deceased Members*. Emphasis added.

²⁴ In an oft-cited (and much discussed) letter dated August 16, 1864, Dr. C. F. W. Walther gives his personal counsel to a “dear brother” on dealing with individuals who are wrestling with this matter. In this letter, Walther insists that “publicly and privately, we must with zeal speak against the secret orders.” “But,” Walter continues, “let us not push away those who are still enmeshed in them and cannot at once convince themselves of the sinfulness of these orders and free themselves from them, but otherwise show themselves to be penitent Christians” (*Lehre and Wehre*, Sept. 1913 [59:394-95]. Translated by Dr. Jerald C. Joersz, March 2002 [file copy in the files of the CTCR].) Walther’s letter must be read in its historical context, and legitimate questions have been raised about the applicability of certain aspects of Walther’s counsel in this letter to more contemporary issues surrounding lodge membership, beliefs, and practices. The pastoral care and concern displayed by Walther in this letter—his concern for souls, his wisdom, his patience—can be affirmed without qualification and continue to serve as a model for pastors today in dealing with specific individuals and situations in this regard.

(See Gal 1:6-9; Acts 4:10-12)

- Does it teach or imply that the one true God can be worshipped under any name or concept of God? (See 1 Ki 18:21; Gal 4:8-9)
- Does it promise or imply eternal rewards for observing the virtues or principles extolled by the organization? (See Eph 2:8-9; Rom 8:7-8)
- Does the organization teach or imply some kind of universal salvation for all who believe that there is a God? (See Jn 3:36; James 2:19)
- Does it speak in terms of heaven being an advanced lodge or as an eternal re-assembly of the brotherhood (sisterhood)? (See Jn 17:3; Rom 6:23)

These questions and others are intended to help the Christian determine whether membership in an organization will allow a person “to give witness to the exclusive and distinctive character of the Christian faith.”²⁵ Pastors will likely find it necessary, from their personal study and preparation and in their particular context, to expand such material as they seek faithfully and pastorally to deal with the problems that arise in this area.

In cases involving lodges whose religious rituals play a less prominent role than in Freemasonry, other factors may be involved. Local practices and the degree to which prospective lodge members are exposed to the official teaching and rituals of the lodge may vary. Because these organizations continue to be unwilling to share publicly information about their rituals and practices, it is difficult to determine if changes in their official positions have occurred. In many cases it appears that lodges are less rigid in the enforcement of their membership requirements. Some local lodges may allow what are in effect “social” memberships to be issued to those who do not wish to participate in initiation rites or in other rituals. In addition, in recent times individuals tend to be less conscientious about examining the specific beliefs and practices of organizations they join. Therefore, the pastor should try to meet with those involved in the situation, as well as with local lodge officials, to determine the extent to which the local lodge adheres to the organization’s official standards and practices. In this way the pastor, as he seeks to provide appropriate counsel, can also determine what requirements of a religious nature are being placed upon members. What is crucial here is that no Christian should participate in any ritual or ceremony that is contradictory to the Gospel. Christians need seriously to consider the public witness they give by belonging to such an organization.

Education and discussion will perhaps need to continue for a lengthy period of time, especially where lodge membership has already been established. It is hoped that when a person is led to see how seriously one’s confession of Christ is to be taken (“to suffer all, even death, rather than fall away from it”²⁶ he will want to separate himself from association with religious rituals that compromise that confession. Pastoral care will need to be exercised patiently yet firmly in asserting the need for Christians “to honor the Son even as they honor the Father” (Jn 5:23).

Eventually it will be necessary to establish a timetable and the minimal action that will need to be taken with regard to congregation members who have chosen to unite with a fraternal organization whose rituals and services include direct or implied teachings that contradict the fundamental teaching of the Christian faith. If deemed necessary, the administration of Holy Communion to those so involved may temporarily need to be suspended until a final resolution is achieved.

One of the goals of pastoral instruction and guidance regarding membership in certain fraternal

²⁵ “Christians and Their Affiliations.” Files of the Commission of Theology and Church Relations. Another resource for working with members of the Masonic Lodge is the Response Series booklet *How to Respond to the Lodge* referenced in footnote 1 above.

²⁶ Quoted from the rite of Confirmation in the LCMS’ *Lutheran Service Book*, 173.

organizations is to help the Christian to be faithful to the principle established by St. Paul in Romans 16: “watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught” (16:17). Here, too, we need to honor our God and His Word concerning those who have a form of godliness but deny its power (2 Tim. 3:5). At the same time, pastors must always take care to speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15), and to present and defend the truth of God’s Word “with gentleness and respect” (1 Peter 3:16). Such loving concern on the part of the pastor will strengthen the sheep of his flock to “be faithful, even to the point of death” so that they might receive from the Good Shepherd His gift of “the crown of life” (Rev 2:10).²⁷

²⁷ The ultimate concern of this document is for the salvation of souls for whom Christ died. Membership in an organization that obviates the Gospel has the potential of endangering people’s souls and salvation. Souls can be lost through trusting in false beliefs. One cannot limp along on both sides of contradictory religious beliefs. Either the generic god of the lodge is the true god or the triune God of Holy Scripture is the true God. Both cannot be true. Faith in the god of the lodge is faith in a non-Trinitarian god, in a Jesus who is not the sinless, divine Son of God, and in salvation by human works. Faith in the God of Scripture is faith in the triune God and faith in Jesus Christ—the divine, sinless Son of God who is the world’s only Savior. Such faith believes salvation comes only by grace through faith in Jesus Christ and not in any way by human works. Justifying grace also empowers holy living by God’s people (Eph 2:8-10).